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MOTIVES FOR COMPOSITION WORK IN THE UPPER ELEMENTARY GRADES¹

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The talk of motivation, as the pedagogical vernacular has it, is rife in the land. And properly, for, whatever the name, the thing is momentous. To no teacher, surely, is the question of motive power more momentous than to the teacher of English; because in the long and difficult struggle for the mastery over one's native tongue victory is almost assured to those who truly strive. Barring the fortunate inheritance of wide estates in the ancestral realm, and barring paupers, each of our pupils must cultivate his own little field for the most that is in it; and it comes near being true that in this domain self-cultivation is the only cultivation. That is to say, if any child wills to master his native tongue, he can—provided he lives long enough and wills hard enough; if he wills not, no power can master it for him. The problem of the teacher, then, almost resolves itself into the problem of making the pupils care, rightly and persistently care, to improve.

In these days of learning-made-easy, when, even without a teacher, all things come to him who reads, certainly the first—I had almost said the only—condition of progress is the possession of the three capital C's—conviction, curiosity, and courage. With this motive power, a teacher's help, though useful, is hardly necessary; without it, all the teacher's friendly tugging will drag the pupil but a stone's throw up the Hill Difficulty, where the teacher must leave him and where he will camp by the wayside for the rest of his days. If the motive power is not there, the teacher's one hope is to kindle it. He cannot do even this for every pupil, but his chief business is to try.

Conviction, curiosity, and courage—the very sound of the words

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is inspiring. What do they mean as applied to intellectual progress? Conviction of the sins of ignorance, conviction of the beauty of rightness; curiosity, intellectual curiosity, the insatiable curiosity of the Elephant's child, the curiosity of Ulysses—

yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought;

and courage, perhaps an inseparable companion of these two, the courage that takes the Elephant's child a thousand miles across Africa to discover what the crocodile had for dinner; the courage of the

strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Conviction, curiosity, and courage, in their highest forms, are not too high for the simplest everyday needs of those who would achieve in any intellectual struggle; and without at least a spark of their ardor even a child's task is hopeless.

So far in this paper the mastery of English has been spoken of as a single thing. It is true that in the grades, far more than in high school or college, it is a single thing: the ability to read, the ability to talk and write, the understanding of the relations of words all together contributing to the enfranchisement of the child in the realm of English. But in the upper grades, with the period of self-consciousness, begins a more direct effort toward the particular and separable ends of reading, composition, and grammar. It is especially in the field of composition—the expression of thought in speech or in writing—that the question of motive is here to be considered.

Very practically, first, why is it such a difficult task to arouse conviction, curiosity, and courage for the mastery of English composition; and second, what are some means of arousing them in children of the upper grades?

This is the situation. The school, with its crowded curriculum, too often forgets, after the first two or three grades, to make improvement in English an end. Frequently there is no time set aside for composition work after formal grammar is begun—in Illinois it is safe to say that two-thirds of the country schools at least plan

for practically no composition work in the seventh and eighth grades—and the teacher is too busy or too indifferent to use the opportunities of other recitations. But even if the teacher does care, the children, most democratic of beings, talk the talk of the majority on the playground, on the streets, in their homes; the talk of the majority is careless of rules and ignorant of standards; with a fourth-grade vocabulary and fourth-grade habits of expression, a seventh- or eighth-grade child can make known most of his wants and most of his thoughts to his playmates and his kin-folks. The conversation that he hears, the local newspapers that he learns to read, pass on to him the worn coins of provincialism, bad grammar, and vague, slovenly, and insincere and high-flown diction. For a few hours a day five days out of seven he is shut up in a different world, where the teacher, perhaps, as one pupil said, “always requests us to use good English.” But what of it? Too often the only use for any English at all is for a few words in answer to rapid-fire questions, and nobody but the teacher has a chance to express himself. If the pupil can do his sums and learn his facts the pupil will “get promoted.” It is soon over, and on the playground a fellow who speaks correctly is likely to be “prissy,” or a girl “stuck up.” In other words, public opinion in the school itself, if let alone, is against improvement, conservative of the wrong things, and the wrong things are breathed in with the very air. How, then, is the child to be convicted of sin?

First, the teacher must have been convicted and curious and courageous about his own self-cultivation in English. If he has been, he will have some true standards, he will know and feel good English when he hears or sees it—not merely correct, but effective and forceful English—and he will know some reasons why it is good; he will have genuine interest in words, and a wide acquaintance with them; he will know how to read and how to talk. This implies of course higher cultivation than the present average the country over; but it is not too much to hope for.

Then the teacher must be convinced that it is supremely worth while to equip a child with the power to express what he thinks in sincere, direct, and clean-cut sentences, however simple, and that clear expression reacts on clear thinking. In my opinion, and this

rather by the way, if not only the first two or three grades but the whole elementary school undertook as its special and peculiar duty the training of a child in the vernacular—understanding, of course, that language is nothing if not an embodiment of thought, and that there is no more direct way of training thought than through this embodiment in words—if the elementary school did no more than give the children the key to the English language, with all that that means, it could no better prepare them for further education, whether outside the schools or in them.

The teacher's genuine interest is bound to stimulate motive for composition work in a great many ways that can hardly be tabulated or measured. More specifically, to any teacher who has this genuine interest there are possibly some means of convicting the children of sin. In the first place, the subject of composition must hold an important place in the school. According to the rhetorical principle of emphasis, that which is dwelt upon or given a conspicuous position will receive attention. Whatever subject looms large will be respected; whatever is tucked into a corner will be forgotten. If possible, then, composition should be dignified with a time for itself on the school program, at least once, better twice or three times, a week in the upper grades. But even if composition cannot have time on the program, it can and must have time in the school day. This time spent on clear, concise, and accurate expression in every subject will be not stolen from these subjects but invested for them. In this hammering away all day long lies the greatest opportunity of the teacher in the grades, far greater than that of any teacher in high school or college. Indeed this drill in oral and written expression in all the subjects of the curriculum is far more important than the separate lessons in expression; so that a teacher can never say he has no time for composition work.

Besides, the mere time element in emphasis, a realization of actual need for correct and forcible expression in other subjects, should prove a powerful motive, a conviction of real and immediate value. What wonder that children consider their habits in English of little importance even in school, when the most continuous expression required of them is the answering of questions at the rate sometimes of fifty to the minute. If a teacher wishes to train

children in right habits of expression he must create opportunities for such expression; he must learn to keep still and let a pupil talk. When the pupil does talk, the teacher should insist that he speak to the point and only to the point, answer the question and nothing but the question, and in the best words at his command. Besides the oral expression in connected sentences to be required in geography, history, grammar, or any other study, some written expression in paragraph form is useful. Five-minute exercises in any subject written on a topic small enough to be handled in five minutes, and conforming to the same standards as other composition work, will help to convince a child of his need for composition training. The proper kind of criticism is another means of conviction and also a help to curiosity and courage. Praise, definite and discriminating praise, is quite as valuable as condemnation; and incidentally the giving of either blame or praise by fellow-pupils may be made for them also a useful exercise in composition. Criticism by the teacher is frequently not enough to counteract the influence of public opinion, but if children can be enlisted to criticize each other, this judgment of peers is a most stimulating influence. If, as sometimes happens, pupils will band together to correct each other's faults outside of school, there is no more difficulty with conviction.

If all other means fail, grades, cold grades, are a last resort. Why should a child be promoted for his ability in arithmetic when he can neither read nor write? Why should he go into high school unable to put two or three consecutive sentences on paper or to speak them without incoherence and blundering? Surely, much that must be done in the high school under present conditions could well be done in the upper grades if throughout all the grades our requirements were higher, our standards more just, and our notion of the field of English composition more comprehensive.

It may be feared that the suggested rigor in requirements, while arousing a conviction of need, will stifle curiosity and courage. This fear is groundless. In the seventh grade, after one or two trials, every child should be able to follow directions for indorsement, title, margin, whatever purely mechanical matters go to the presenting of a paper in good form. The very fact that even

a stupid boy can do so much correctly makes it worth while to give him his achievement and to take nothing but his best. Rigorous requirement of good form in the composition lesson itself is not enough; the neatness and exactitude will not carry over unless the teacher makes a bridge for them—but this he can easily do. As to the less mechanical matters, no such absolute rule can be adopted, but step should follow step with a feeling of progress, or curiosity and courage die. The teaching of one thing for which a pupil is ever after responsible, then another thing plus the first, then a third plus the first and second, is the surest way to give that feeling of accomplishment, of getting somewhere, which keeps curiosity and courage alive.

It follows from these observations that, in avoiding discouragement and apathy, one important help is a movable goal, ever visible yet ever receding; or perhaps rather a course marked by lines each of which appears a sufficient goal until we approach it. A series of small triumphs is most heartening. Here the teacher's knowledge of standards, of what qualities really do make composition good, is most important; his knowledge of the children almost equally so. To write one theme a month or a description or a story a week is no purpose at all; and even to prepare these in good form is not a sufficient one. A seventh- or eighth-grade child is old enough to understand something of what he is doing, if the teacher understands it. Assignments in the form of problems, definite detailed assignments, are stimulating, as every real teacher of any subject has discovered. Another source of encouragement and curiosity is in the right models, carefully considered. How did the writer do it? If we can see clearly, perhaps we can do it too. Given all these means, add the utmost friendliness between teacher and pupils, so that the teacher's interest becomes a personal appeal, and even in spite of all unfavorable conditions, the average pupil will have kindled within him the motive power for achievement.